The Aeroplane in British Border Wars

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WHEN the Great War ended we had only just discovered the full possibilities of the aeroplane. In imagination we saw all kinds of ways of putting it to decisive and economical use. In particular, the highlands of the northwest frontier of India were constantly cited as a region where the interminable "punitive expeditions" against recalcitrant tribesmen could be carried through rapidly with the airman's aid. Half the battle in these tangled mountain regions is to know where and when the tribesmen are gathering for the attack. The aeroplane, so the experts said, would be able to see the "other side of the hill" and would enable the frontier authorities to dispense with the numerous patrols which they at present maintain.

Not only so, but it would work havoc on the tribal encampments and on the columns as they advanced toward India through the narrow defiles which alone give access from the mountains toward the Indus River. We reminded ourselves complacently of the damage wrought by the airmen after Allenby's victory in Palestine against the Turkish forces retreating through the narrow valleys toward the passage of the Jordan and we thought that the development of the air service during the war had given us a short cut out of the tiresome frontier campaigns which are a marked and costly feature of Indian Government.

This theory was soon to be put to the test. When, on the top of the disorders in the Punjab last spring, the Afghans crossed the frontier, many of the border tribesmen, the Mahsuds and Waziri, took the field along with them and, worse still, part of the tribal militia revolted and went over to the Afghans with their arms. A word about this militia. There was for many years in India a "forward" party and a "forward" policy. The "forward" party was all for pressing on into the hill-country against the unruly tribesmen, who were forever engaged in raids and pillaging expeditions, and even for an advance, if there were an excuse, into Afghanistan. They insisted that the Afghans could not be trusted and that the only safe course was to penetrate their country, and, coming out on the other side, await the Russian attack which in those days the "forwards" always insisted was inevitable.

But those days passed, and with them the "forward" policy. A more sober mood prevailed and in Lord Curzon's time as Viceroy it was accepted that the advanced frontier posts should be withdrawn and that this No Man's Land of tumbled tribal country should be held, not by British troops, either white or native Indians, but by levies from the tribes who inhabited it, to be called a militia and paid by the Indian authorities. On the whole the system had worked well, but the latest Afghan war and the prospect of the rich plunder of the plains were too much for the militia's loyalty.

EVEN had the Afghan war ended in a decisive defeat for the Afghans, the question of what should be done with the revolted tribesmen would have been difficult. But the terms of the Peace Treaty showed that in fact the Afghans had, to say the least, fought a drawn battle. The Amir did indeed lose the annual subsidy which the British Government had paid for many years, but the Indian Government formally abandoned the right of controlling the foreign relations of Afghanistan, to which right hitherto it had always attached the utmost importance. In other words, the Amir had now the right to enter into relations, if he chose, with the Russian Government—the one thing of which the Indian Government had always been afraid—and he lost no time in using his opportunity. An Afghan mission was very soon at Moscow. The indecisive character of the war was not lost on the frontier tribes, who, even after the Afghans had withdrawn, continued their raiding expeditions and here and there maintained a footing on the British side of the frontier. Hence the campaign which, after several months of fighting, still continues. In this expedition for the first time native troops alone were used, led by the white officers. It was suggested that the usual stiffening of white troops was not needed because the aeroplane would damage and demoralize the tribes, much as during the war it demoralized the native Egyptian labor corps, who used to flee post-haste down the Sinai railway track when an aeroplane appeared overhead. And at the beginning the aeroplane was reported to have done great things. The villages of the Mahsuds were sought out and severely bombed, so that the principal among them was reduced, according to the telegrams, to a mere heap of dust; it was not stated whether there were any non-combatants in these villages nor, if so, what became of them.

After a time the tribesmen were reported to be seeking peace and the aeroplane seemed to have been fairly vindicated as a weapon of frontier war. But no sooner was surrender foreshadowed than fresh fighting was reported and a series of engagements of no agreeable character was fought by the invading Indian columns. The Mahsuds resemble closely the Highlanders in the eighteenth century, and like the wild Scotsmen in Neil Munro's "The Road" and Stevenson's "Kidnapped," they resented especially the driving of a great road into their country and the order that they should give up their arms. The telegram describing this last grievance took one at once to the passage in "Kidnapped" in which Alan Breck complains of the Highlandmen's enemies that "they plucked the weapons from the hands of the clansmen, that had borne arms for thirty centuries." So the war went on and the airman's attack with it. It was then discovered that beyond question this sort of terrain and this type of enemy did not make for the airman's success. The hills were pitted everywhere with clefts and caverns in which the tribesmen and their families could take easy refuge, and they showed a marked disinclination to present themselves in compact masses for the airman's benefit. They were far from being demoralized; on the contrary, their naturally warlike character was rather sharpened than blunted by this method of attack. We are compelled to revise our opinion: for warfare against martial tribes in mountain regions the aeroplane is by no means as effectual as we had thought it.

But now comes another little war, short and sharp, and a great triumph for the airman who has won it almost single-handed. Again it is a question of the abandonment of an old and accepted policy. In British Somaliland, just south of Abyssinia, there has lived for over twenty years a Mullah called the "Mad." He is the chief of a force of Dervishes, and ever and anon he has appeared out of the interior of the country, raiding and oppressing the tribes friendly to the British and occasionally cutting up a British outpost. There have been many expeditions against him, but none has ever killed or caught him. He has been driven back into the desert or has retired of his own accord—the most profitable tactics that he could pursue—but whatever losses he has suffered, he has always made his escape and always, after an interval, appeared again, surrounded by the Dervish force which in these regions the "holy man," be he called Mahdi or Khalifa or mere Mullah, can always gather round him.

THE British Government eventually decided that the game of pursuing this elusive Mullah was not worth the cost and it adopted a policy of holding only the coast line of Somaliland and leaving the interior, which is barren and worthless anyway, to the Mullah if he chose to want it, a policy at once cautious, economical and wise. During the war there were no troops to spare in any case for such profitless side-shows as this, and the Mullah was left severely to himself. He took advantage of his immunity by emerging from the interior, attacking the "friendlies" again and installing himself in strong stone forts and substantial encampments on our very doorstep. It was this that led to his undoing. For, naturally enough, he did not know about the aeroplane, and when he did it was too late for regrets.

This "little war" began on January 21 and ended on February 9, with virtually no casualties to the British side. The stone forts and camps were pounded to pieces from the air and the Mullah fled to his last stronghold, which was captured in similar fashion, almost the whole of his following being destroyed. The story is the exact reverse of the Afghan border war. On the desert everything is written out flat and plain, and camp and fort stare rigidly toward the sky. The airman could ask no better target nor an enemy choose a more fatal form of "refuge."

But was the victory, then, complete? Alas! truth compels one to confess that though fort and camp were destroyed and most of his followers killed or captured, the "Mad" Mullah himself escaped once more with seventy of his partisans; not a large force, indeed, but large enough to be the nucleus of a fresh army for a man whose holiness is so repeatedly demonstrated by the complete failure of the infidel to catch him. It is all too probable that we shall hear again of the Somali Mullah. But even if we do, he will never again, so long as we have the aeroplanes, be the formidable disturber of the peace that he has so often been.

Who Pays the Income Tax?